

Writing, Thinking, Playing, Laughing

[Steven Connor](#)

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One of the oldest and most venerable entries in the book of received ideas is the belief that comedy and laughter are not to be reasoned about without annihilating them. Not only are there very few laughs to be had from philosophy and reasoned argument, it is popularly assumed, they are also positively toxic to laughter. One thinks of Samuel Johnson's remark that he always intended to be a philosopher, 'only cheerfulness kept breaking in'. One even finds Freud locking step with this cliché at the beginning of his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: sympathising with the reader who might 'become indignant at a method of approach which threatens to ruin his enjoyment of jokes' (Freud 1981, 57).

I want first of all to talk those of you who hold to this corny belief out of it. But I want to go further than this, to argue that comedy and cogitation are not only fully and affluently compatible, but also closely, even definitionally affiliated. I am going to say that thinking is essentially comic. But then, just when it may look like I have won you to that view, I will try to complicate it by suggesting that comedy and thought are held together by a kind of antagonism as well as an affinity (an antagonism, what is more, that involves the very question of antagonism itself).

What does thinking do? There are many subsidiary operations involved in thinking, among which we might particularise dividing, linking, associating, inspecting, wondering. But, for W.R. Bion, thinking is to be understood in terms of one kind of action in particular. Thinking for Bion is fundamentally a holding, in both spatial and temporal registers – a containment and a suspension. In the earliest stages of human life, for Bion, and at certain points of difficulty and distress later in life, it may be said that human mental life is a matter of 'thoughts without a thinker', in which there nothing or nobody there to have thoughts, but only as it were, a dim and dubious scene spasmodically illuminated and traversed by thoughts themselves. Bion suggests that this theory differs radically from other theories of cognition, which assume the

existence of cognitive structures prior to the having of thoughts. For Bion, 'thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way round' (Bion 1987, 111). Bion suggests that psychopathology may be associated not only with 'a breakdown in the development of thoughts', but also with 'a breakdown in the development of the apparatus for "thinking" or dealing with thoughts' (Bion 1987, 111). For such patients, the psychotherapeutic process may be a process of learning to think, where learning to think means nothing less than becoming a thinker, the name we give to the one capable of holding open a space in which thoughts may be accommodated. The thinker is a kind of *metteur-en-scène* or 'producer' of thoughts, in the theatrical sense.

The importance of the function of holding for Bion comes from the fact that he regarded thinking as a development of the primary processes of alimation, in which that which is good is subject to a process of actual (in the case of nourishment) or metaphorical incorporation, and that which is bad is ejected. In its earliest development, the child divides the world into these two functions, or, more accurately, one might say, the child arises from this division. The alternatives of good and bad are focussed on the primary good object, the breast, source of all comfort and nourishment, and the bad object, which, for Bion, following Melanie Klein, is the hypostasis of the 'no-breast', the absent breast which is given a positive form and thus both becomes the target of lacerating rage and is itself a source of persecution. To think is to retard the evacuation of ideas and impulses, to hold back the splitting off or spitting out of that which is thought to be not me. It is to tolerate, to give temporary, but continuing accommodation to what otherwise be regarded as alien. It is for this reason that, in the earliest formulation of his theory of thinking, Bion represented bad thoughts as 'evacuated at high speed as missiles to annihilate space' (Bion 1987, 113). This evacuation can also be represented as an assault on time, since time is perhaps the very form of frustration, the yawning gap between the now of the need and the not-yet of the absent breast. Bion reports that the relationship with time 'was graphically brought home to me by a patient who said over and over again that he was wasting time – and continued to waste it. The patient's aim is to destroy time by wasting it. The consequences are illustrated in the description in Alice in Wonderland of the Mad Hatter's tea-party – it is always four o'clock' (Bion 1987, 113).

There is an obvious objection to this, namely that it may seem to describe only the most casual and informal kinds of thinking – imagining, projection of possibilities, daydream, reverie (indeed, Bion uses the name reverie for the relaxed, assimilative attention of the analyst which offers to the patient a model

of what thinking might be. One might be forgiven for assuming that the more purposive and systematic kinds of thought – of reasoning, calculation and figuring out, of the assessment of consequences – involve coming to decisions and deductions, all of which have determinate results or, as we now say, outputs. There is a story that may indicate the limits of this view. Jacques d’Alembert was an illegitimate child, left on the steps of a Paris church, who was taken up by a poor family. Though the young boy showed enormous talent as a mathematician, he was persuaded to take up the law instead in order to get the financial security that his adoptive parents could never provide him. So d’Alembert sold off all his mathematics books to buy law books. But he lay awake at night, tormented by no longer being able to recall his favourite proofs. Finally, he succumbed and, little by little, bought back all his mathematical books, resigning himself to a life of material poverty but intellectual glory. D’Alembert needed, not just the outcome of the proof, but the process, to be accessible to him. The proof did not mean that what led to it could simply be deleted, discarded or discharged. The proof was not like a crossword puzzle that, once solved, had lost all its intrigue and provocation; rather, it was like a piece of music, the enjoyment of which deepened the more its separate parts, especially its beginning and end, were implicated in one another.

For Bion, the enemy of thought is the pain of frustration. More painful even than the simple absence of the thing desired (of which the breast is supposed to be the prototype), is the ambivalence it seems to induce in the internal image of that which is missing, which now simultaneously signifies the thing and its absence. In one sense, the thought of the missing thing is a kind of compensation or hallucinatory substitute for it. In another sense, it is the positive form of the absence itself. ‘Is a “thought” the same as an absence of a thing?’ wonders Bion. ‘If there is no “thing”, is “no thing” a thought and is it by virtue of the fact that there is “no thing” that one recognizes that “it” must be thought?’ (Bion 1962, 34). Thinking, for Bion, is in fact identical with negativity, identical, that is with the principle of non-identity, since all thinking is abstract, even mathematical in its form.

I think this can help us understand some of the functions of the comic. For it points us to an important principle shared by comedy and thinking, namely that they seem to turn around a sense of the null, the negative, the nihilate, the not-there.

For one example of this functional presence of the negative, we can follow Freud in his often excruciatingly slow-motion account of the functioning of jokes. As many have recognised, timing is everything in comedy – we need only

recall the observation that comedy is simply tragedy speeded up – but few have recognised the degree to which comedy might actually be said to be made of time. About half way into his book on jokes, Freud asserts that ‘both for erecting and for maintaining a psychical inhibition some ‘psychical expenditure’ is required. And...it is therefore plausible to suppose that this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved’ (Freud 1960, 117). Perhaps the simplest example that Freud gives is of wordplay, in which two ideas that normally are held apart are brought together by a similarity of sound:

We notice, too, that children, who, as we know, are in the habit of still treating words as things, tend to expect words that are the same or similar to have the same meaning behind them – which is a source of many mistakes that are laughed at by grown-up people. If, therefore, we derive unmistakable enjoyment in jokes from being transported by the use of the same or a similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one...this enjoyment is no doubt correctly to be attributed to economy in psychical expenditure. The pleasure in a joke arising from a ‘short-circuit’ like this seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word—the further apart they are, and thus the greater the economy which the joke’s technical method provides in the train of thought. We may notice, too, that here jokes are making use of a method of linking things up which is rejected and studiously avoided by serious thought. (Freud 1960, 119)

Though Freud emphasises that this economy of effort is often established by brevity or acceleration, he does not explicitly discuss the fact that the economising of jokes depends upon temporal extension and, more specifically, what might be called a friction of durations. In a joke, a certain amount of psychic expenditure is projected, or, more accurately, accumulated in advance. When the need for that expenditure is suddenly removed, there is an uncomfortable tension, and the now-surplus energy that has been stockpiled is discharged in the form of laughter. The profit of a joke derives from this borrowing against the future. At work in this idea is the principle of delayed gratification, according to which the deferral of pleasure leads to its augmentation. The longer the subject has to maintain the expectation of psychical work in an unarrived future, the greater the pleasure of the discharge when it turns out the work will not be required. Nothing is simply or straightforwardly present in this calculation; the positive profit of the laugh is derived from the fictional capital of the virtual effort, that is never made and so

can paradoxically both be dispensed with and dispensed in the sense of being paid out, or cashed in, in the form of laughter.

Here, we should recall Freud's conviction that pleasure resulted from the reduction of tension, which would lead him eventually to the principle that the ultimate pleasure was the reduction of tension to zero, in the state of nirvana or bliss. This is looked forward to in the final sentences of Freud's joke book, in which he identifies this state of bliss with that of childhood, in which there is no delay between impulse and gratification. This is probably why young children laugh so abundantly, but are so hopeless at understanding jokes. For children are not yet too late for happiness, in the way that, for Freud, laughter always is:

The euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy – the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life. (Freud 1960, 235).

What should strike us in all of this is fundamental insubstantiality of Freud's notion of psychic expenditure. For, we need to ask, as we need to ask of every system involving the circulation of energies, what does this stuff consist of? What precisely is being accumulated, invested, expended and squandered? Everything here depends upon relative rather than absolute quantities, upon a kind of algebra rather than a mathematics of positive quantity. All the way through his writing, Freud puts to work the idea of economy, based around various forms of expenditure, saving and profit, but is never really able to identify what the substance of this currency – libido, for example – actually is. Laughter is a pyramid scheme, that takes out a loan from an imaginary future, enabling it to turn a profit of pleasure, with no need for anything to be paid back to the future, since nothing has come out of its account. In a classic zero-sum relation, $-1 + 1 = 0$; but here, since the return to zero itself yields a positive quantity, then we may say that $-1 + 1 = 1$.

Where has this surplus come from? One answer might be, from time itself, the tensive structure of which makes it impossible ever to get one's books in balance. Another answer is that the surplus is generated from the play or friction of thought against itself. Joking is, as Freud remarks in passing, 'an activity which aims at deriving pleasure from mental processes, whether

intellectual or otherwise' (Freud 1960, 95). Jokes are a kind of playing with, or, taking note of the economic inflection which Freud gives to so many of his analyses, a kind of playing on thought itself, here in the sense of playing the market, or playing the tables. Many of Freud's examples of nonsense jokes seem to involve this principle:

A gentleman entered a pastry-cook's shop and ordered a cake; but he soon brought it back and asked for a glass of liqueur instead. He drank it and began to leave without having paid. The proprietor detained him. "What do you want?" asked the customer. – "You've not paid for the liqueur." – "But I gave you the cake in exchange for it." – "You didn't pay for that either." – "But I hadn't eaten it." (Freud 1960, 59).

Freud adds a crisper example of this kind of joke in a footnote which recalls Lichtenberg's reference to a knife without a blade which has no handle (Freud 1960, 59). This is a joke, very literally, made of nothing, or almost nothing. Since it is a joke about getting something for nothing, or nothing but thinking, it is actually an image of the process of joke-making itself, as is the joke about pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps, and many examples of Irish bulls, like that of the Kilkenny cats: soldiers were amusing themselves by tying together the tails of two cats and hanging them over a washing line to fight, when their commanding officer approached, at which they quickly released the cats by severing their tails. Their explanation for the bleeding tails was that two cats had been fighting and had eaten each other, all but their tails.

The constitutive role of nothingness in jokes is also apparent in the short, but pungent discussion of humour that Kant provides in a short section of his *Critique of Judgement*. The purpose of Kant's remarks is to establish that laughter (like music), is not really an activity of judgement, but rather a physical sensation. The pleasure of wit, or joking (which Kant actually calls *Gedankenspiel*, playing on thought, or the play of thought), 'springs merely from the change of the representations in the judgement, which, while unproductive of any thought conveying an interest, yet enlivens the mind' (Kant 2007, 160). Kant is here saying that there is a kind of mental action that is not really thinking at all, but a kind of simulation or artificial stimulation of it. Kant declares that '[l]aughter is caused by 'a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing' (Kant 2007, 161). Laughter cannot come simply from the disappointment of expectation, for how, he asks, can we derive gratification from a disappointment? Rather, 'it must rest solely upon the fact that the

reduction is a mere play of representations, and, as such, produces an equilibrium of the vital forces of the body' (Kant 2007, 161).

To illustrate this, Kant gives his famously feeble example of a joke:

An Indian at an Englishman's table in Surat saw a bottle of ale opened, and all the beer turned into froth and flowing out. The repeated exclamations of the Indian showed his great astonishment. 'Well, what is so wonderful in that?' asked the Englishman. 'Oh, I'm not surprised myself,' said the Indian, 'at its getting out, but at how you ever managed to get it all in.' (Kant 2007, 161)

Kant argues that in laughing at this joke (let us humour him and assume that we do) we are not congratulating ourselves at not being as dim as the Indian, for this would be a work of judgement, the action of which he precisely aims to deny in the case of laughter. Rather, we are responding to the sudden replacement of a sensible idea by a nonsensical one. This sudden annihilation of sense brings about a kind of minor mental shell-shock, or internal reverberation:

[I]n all such cases the joke must have something in it capable of momentarily deceiving us. Hence, when the semblance vanishes into nothing, the mind looks back in order to try it over again, and thus by a rapidly succeeding tension and relaxation it is jerked to and fro and put in oscillation. Since the snapping of what was, as it were, tightening up the string takes place suddenly (not by a gradual loosening), the oscillation must bring about a mental movement and a sympathetic internal movement of the body. This continues involuntarily and produces fatigue, but in so doing it also affords recreation (the effects of a commotion conducive to health). (Kant 2007, 162)

So: the efforts of the mind to make sense of the contradiction between something and nothing, between a something that really is something and a something that is really nothing at all, produces a kind of mimetic vibrato or frottage in the body.

For supposing we assume that some movement in the bodily organs is associated sympathetically with all our thoughts, it is readily intelligible how the sudden act above referred to, of

shifting the mind now to one standpoint and now to the other, to enable it to contemplate its object, may involve a corresponding and reciprocal straining and slackening of the elastic parts of our viscera, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (and resembles that felt by ticklish people), in the course of which the lungs expel the air with rapidly succeeding interruptions, resulting in a movement beneficial to health. This alone, and not what goes on in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing. (Kant 2007, 162)

As I have said, Kant is very keen to insist that the mind, or the mind exercising its power of judgement, is nowhere at work in all this, which is rather the vitalising and refreshing work of the body upon the mind. But Kant cannot maintain this line quite consistently, since the very bodily oscillation that provides the mind with its invigorating workout is produced from a kind of resonance with a mental oscillation, in which 'the mind looks back in order to try it over again'. The mind appears to be supplementing itself, in an action of rapid self-review, or movement back on and then back to itself, a coming apart from and returning to itself, that produces a bodily effect, that in turn rebounds on the mind. The mind, as it were, provides a vitalising vibrato for itself from its own bewilderment.

We might recall here an interchange from the trial scene in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*:

'What do you know about this business?' the King said to Alice.
 'Nothing,' said Alice.
 'Nothing whatever?' persisted the King.
 'Nothing whatever,' said Alice.
 'That's very important,' the King said, turning to the jury. They were just beginning to write this down on their slates, when the White Rabbit interrupted: 'Unimportant, your Majesty means, of course,' he said in a very respectful tone, but frowning and making faces at him as he spoke.
 'Unimportant, of course, I meant,' the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, 'important – unimportant – important – unimportant – ' as if he were trying which word sounded best. (Carroll 1976, 155)

Kant insists that all of this is produced, not just out of displacement, or incongruity, but out of a sudden reduction to nothing:

we laugh outright, and the reason lies in the fact that we had an expectation which is suddenly reduced to nothing [eine Erwartung sich plötzlich in nichts verwandelt] We must be careful to observe that the reduction is not one into the positive contrary of an expected object – for that is always something, and may frequently pain us – but must be a reduction to nothing [sondern in nichts verwandeln müsse]. (Kant 2007, 161)

The very word nothing rings all the way through Kant's discussion. Music and laughter are 'two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas, or even with representations of the understanding, by which, all said and done, nothing is thought [wodurch am Ende nichts gedacht wird]' (Kant 2007, 160). The laughter at the joke about the beerbottle comes because 'the bubble of our expectation was extended to the full and suddenly burst into nothing' (Kant 2007, 161) (Kant's translator James Creed Meredith sneaks in an extra giggle here, for there are no bubbles in Kant's German, which reads flatly 'unsre Erwartung war gespannt, und verschwindet plötzlich in nichts'); 'Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing [der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts]' (Kant 2007, 161); '[W]hen the semblance vanishes into nothing [wenn der Schein in Nichts verschwindet], the mind looks back in order to try it over again' (Kant 2007, 162)

Why does Kant keep insisting on the reduction to nothing? Why would a simple switching or diminution of attention not be enough to elicit a comic response? It seems to be because he wants to make an absolute distinction between laughter and thinking, or the particular kind of thinking he calls the exercise of judgement. 'This alone [i.e. the quivering of the intestines], and not what goes on in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing [welche allein und nicht das was im Gemüte vorgeht, die eigentliche Ursache der Vergnügens an einem Gedanken ist, der im Grunde nichts vorstellt]' (Kant 2007, 162). The English here has an ambiguity that the capitalisation conventions of German holds at bay. For the English allows the thought both to represent nothing, in the sense of not being a representation of anything at all, and to represent Nothing, that is to be the thought of nothingness itself. This is in fact the very ambivalence that oscillates through Kant's discussion of the oscillation of thought. Is this the action of thought on the body (the thought that reflects on itself and discovers itself after all to be nothing)? Or is it the action of the body upon thought, a merely mechanical mental action that has nothing in it of judgement? Is thinking nothing, or does it involve the thought of (thinking of) nothing? Is this a thought that can be thought through to the end, or is one not noosed in a

feedback loop? A joke made by Goethe in his *Elective Affinities* jumps through something like the same hoop: 'Better to write nothing than not to write at all' - 'Lieber nichts zu schreiben als nicht zu schreiben' (Goethe 1971, 8).

I want to build a parallel between the generative negativity in Freud's account and Bion's assertion that the dynamic of thinking is devised to deal with nothings, not-things, absences, abeyances, gaps. Both comedy and thinking involve a remaining open to the not-quite nothing that is nonsense.

But before I finally get that claim up on its feet, I need to consider an awkward, undigested residue in comedy that makes it hard for it to be simply assimilated to thought as such. Simon Critchley's account of laughter suggests one way in which laughter and thinking may be related. Critchley sees laughter as a kind of practical philosophy, jokes, for example, being 'forms of practical abstraction, socially-embedded philosophizing' (Critchley 2002, 87). In particular, humour focuses on the predicament of the body, functioning 'by exploiting the gap between being a body and having a body, between – let us say – the physical and the metaphysical aspects of being human' (Critchley 2000, 43). Humour defines us as moistly, earthily human, by pointing up the ways in which we so often fall short of the ideal of being human – by becoming an animal, perhaps in that condition of foolishness known in French as *bêtise*, for example (Critchley 2002, 36). This is to say in essence that humour is fundamentally a reflection on ourselves, and in the process a philosophy turned against itself, a phenomenological analysis of the stubborn inherence of the body in the most abstract of philosophical conceptions. It is a kind of reasoning through and of the body, which finds in the repeated acknowledgement of limit a principle of modest transcendence. 'We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness' (Critchley 2002, 111).

This is a very attractive view, from which I would not wish to dissent too violently. But we should note that something has been done to the idea of humour to allow Critchley his conclusion. For the essence of the philosophy of humour is to be found, not in the guffaw but the smile. What is more, Critchley has a particular smile in mind, that exuded by the young Samuel Beckett in characterising conditions in the devastated town of St-Lo in Northern France following the D-Day landings. What was important about the experience, Beckett wrote, was 'the occasional glimpse obtained...of that smile at the human condition as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of Burroughs and Wellcome, – the smile deriding, among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health' (Beckett, quoted, Critchley 2002, 110-11). Critchley finds in this

Olympian smile ‘the essence of humour’ (Critchley 2002, 111). Despite the admiration for Beckett’s comedy that I share with him, I am surprised that he should have come to rest on this passage in particular, which I have always found shallow, sneering and false. The young Beckett may have valued the factitious Schopenhauerian aloofness regarding every form of human happiness or suffering, but I don’t. It may perhaps be true that the comic impulse is surprisingly resistant to the extinguishing effect of bombs, but I flatly deny the assertion that the human condition, or its capacity to smile (Beckett’s syntax does not make it clear which is being referred to) cannot be enhanced by what are derisively called ‘the elixirs of Burroughs and Wellcome’ (by which preening formula he means the penicillin that will save lives and relieve agony).

Just as he is about to deliver his punchline, something clenches in Critchley’s hitherto generous account of the philosophical nature of comedy. That something is the return, through the quotation from Beckett, of something like a violent fissure between the body and the empire of thought. Now, here is the place, regrettably late in proceedings, to observe that there have only ever been two theories of comedy. What I have been considering so far have been versions of what is known as the ‘incongruity theory’, that states that we laugh at things that don’t add up or make sense. But there is another view of comedy, that has been most tellingly articulated by Thomas Hobbes, as ‘a suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly’ (Hobbes 1969, 42). Our laughter at absurdity, nonsense or disproportion may well strike us as altogether more philosophical and intellectually enlarging than laughter at people with hunchbacks, funny accents or black skin, for in laughing at incongruity there appears to be no obvious target, unless it is ourselves (though we should note that Hobbes’s definition includes the sudden glory of eminence over ourselves as provocative of laughter).

Theories of laughter have oscillated regularly between Hobbes’s ‘superiority theory’, which Quentin Skinner has shown to be a restatement of a classical view of comedy as principally involving a ridiculing of the base or disgraceful (Skinner 2004, 140-1) and the incongruity theory that has been maintained by writers such as Francis Hutcheson, Kant and Schopenhauer. Even where these two alternatives have not explicitly been in the picture, they can be discerned behind some of the other distinctions that are regularly made in discussions of the comic, in particular that between wit and humour. Wit is derived from witan, to know, and is associated with the quick and aggressive use of intelligence allied to a snaky tongue or sharpened pen. Humour refers back to the theory that human lives were governed by the balance of four principal

bodily fluids, or humours, the composition of which determined one's character or temperament. Wit becomes associated with the use of comedy as a satirical weapon; humour with the unwitting expression of temperament. Wit is active and transitive, humour is passive or intransitive. 'Wit goes for the jugular, not the jocular', as Florence King has put it (King 1989, 140). Wit tends to be strongly normative, even in its apparently most anarchic forms; humour tends to be, or allows its audience to be, whimsically forgiving of idiosyncrasy. Harold Nicolson sums up these opposite qualities:

the essential difference between humour and wit is that, whereas wit is always intentional, humour is always unintentional. Wit possess an object; it is critical, aggressive, and often cruel; it depends for its success upon condensation, revelation, suddenness, and surprise, and it necessitates a quick and deliberate motion of the mind; it is not a private indulgence but invariably needs an audience; it is thus a social phenomenon. Humour on the other hand has no object; it does not seek to wound others, it seeks only to protect the self; it is not a sword but a shield. So far from entailing an expenditure of intellectual or psychic effort, it seeks to economise that effort; it does not depend on suddenness or surprise, but is contemplative, conciliatory, ruminating; and it is largely a private indulgence and does not require an audience for its enjoyment. (Nicolson 1956, 18)

The contest between wit and humour has often modulated into a contrast between alleged national temperaments (the whimsical humour of the English compared with the spurting *esprit* of the French), in a kind of comic recursion (is the theory of ethnic comic temperament itself an instance of the superiority theory or the incongruity theory?).

How, then, are we to legislate between the claims of the incongruity and superiority theories? I want to return to the ideas of W.R. Bion with which I began. I think Bion's notion of the tendency of the human mind to deal with negativity by precipitating it in the form of bad objects which it strives to split off and expel from consciousness may be taken as a suggestive account of the function of laughter, which has often been thought of, at least by adherents of the superiority theory running from Aristotle at least through to Bergson, as purgative. In small and measured doses, there is undoubtedly a tonic effect in reducing the tension involved in the copresence of positive and negative things. But Bion sees in such attempted ejections a kind of refusal or premature evacuation of the holding function of thought, which must aim to move from

what, following Melanie Klein he calls the 'psychotic' position, to the 'depressive' condition, in which it is possible for positive and negative to be thought together. Laughter can be thought of as the natural end or outcome of the comic, and yet the discharge of laughter also exhausts comedy, bringing to an end its ambivalence, in a violent partition.

This is perhaps why comedy is thought of so much as an affair of the tongue and ear. For, as Marshall McLuhan, and other theorists of the oral have maintained, oral cultures are cultures of immediate discharge, of undelayed gratification. In oral cultures, there is little gap of reflection, no space of thought between feeling and words. It is for this reason that McLuhan can suggest that 'terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time' (McLuhan 1962, 32). It is writing which makes it possible to draw back, to hold fire, to separate action from reaction, precisely because it is the nature of writing to abstract words from their occasions. The very thing that makes writing dubious and untrustworthy, namely, the fact that it is possible to say truthfully in writing 'I am dead', and the fact that all writing in a sense signifies the mortality or possible absence of its author, makes it possible for writing to create more complex compositions of presence and absence. This gap is, in the end, a nothing, a pause pour rien, or nothing but delay or postponement themselves, a nothing prolonged into a something. That something is thinking, or the space in which complex thoughts can be borne.

Of course, it is not possible to think without any kind of discharge, decision or determination. Thinking requires and generates distinctions, as is indicated by the story of the Jewish jury in a complex trial. Invited to give his verdict, the foreman of the jury says, 'We would like first of all to note what a complex and difficult trial this has been. Furthermore, we would like to record our admiration for the expert way in which the case for the prosecution has been made, and the skilful and robust manner in which the defence has been mounted.' Beginning to grow impatient, the judge urges the foreman to deliver his verdict. The foreman says 'By all means, your honour, but I can scarcely do so without first saying how much we admired your masterly summing up of the case, and the careful instructions you have given us to guide our deliberations.' By now the irritation of the judge is quite palpable, and he snaps 'Please, Mister Foreman, I must insist that you now give us your verdict. Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?' To which the foreman replies, 'Very well, your honour. Having reviewed all the possibilities and considered all the arguments in this complex case, we have come to the conclusion that it would be best if we didn't get involved.'

Of course, thinking does not and cannot consist entirely of maintaining ambivalence. To think, to reason, to deliberate, must always involve decisions and distinctions, sometimes of a definitive and irreversible kind. The making of a discrimination is always likely to be more productive than the seeing of a resemblance. But it is important to make a distinction between the making of a distinction and the effecting of a split, in the sense marked out by Bion. A distinction establishes and maintains a relation between what is differentiated, even and especially if the relation is one of determinate negation: a is not only not-b, it is what arises from its specific way of being not-b. A split makes things unthinkable, nonrelational, incomparable. Seen in this way, distinguishing is the primary work of thought, insofar as thinking must always be distinguishing itself from itself in thought; thinking means coming unstuck from yourself, putting a spanner in the works of your self-resemblance.

Thinking is comic in the sense that it enables us to cleave together in our dividedness, that condition in which, as Sartre says, 'I am nothing without having to be what I am and yet in so far as I have to be what I am, I am without having to be' (Sartre 1984, 309). But comedy is itself divided, between the tendency to simplify complexity by dividing something from nothing, which we can see in the expulsive action of laughter, and the tendency to allow things and no-things to coexist and even to propagate. Perhaps the relation between comedy and thought is itself just such a complex coaction of things and no-things. Comedy is a kind of play-thinking, a thinking that is not quite itself. In this sense, it may be possible to read comedy as straining against laughter, as well as aiming to induce it. This would make comedy, or one side of it, a kind of immuno-suppressant.

Here we might note a second kind of danger, different from the danger of not being able to tolerate or contain thoughts, and one that it seems to me is much more likely to manifest itself in non-psychotic persons, though Bion seems to signal it in some brief comments he makes about the development of a kind of omnipotence fantasy in patients in whom 'intolerance of frustration is not so great as to activate the mechanisms of evasion and yet is too great to bear dominance of the reality principle' (Bion 1987, 114). This is the danger, not of the absence of a thinking apparatus to hold thoughts together, but of a kind of thinking that itself becomes inflexible and thing-like, a thinking that has so to speak closed around itself, a container that has become a content. The comic here can become a kind of calcified routine. What this protects against is not the nothingness that may be embedded in thoughts, the fact that all thoughts are at once things and no-things, but the nothingness that Jean-Paul Sartre saw in consciousness itself. It protects, not, as in Bion's account, against the

thought of lack, but rather against the lack (the not-ness, the not-all-there-ness, maybe even the not-at-all-there-ness) of thought itself, immunises against the inkling of the un-thing that thought itself can seem to be. This, in short is the condition of bad faith, the wilful taking of oneself as an object, in the most limited possible sense of the word object (paradoxically enough, this may in fact be a fantasy of an object, its very thinginess the effect of its saturation with blocked desire). In fact, Sartre sees this tendency as characteristic of the serious person – the political revolutionary, for example:

all serious thought is thickened by the world; it coagulates; it is a dismissal of human reality in favor of the world. The serious man is “of the world” and has no resource in himself. He does not even imagine any longer the possibility of getting out of the world, for he has given to himself the type of existence of the rock, the consistency, the inertia, the opacity of being-in-the-midst-of-the-world. (Sartre 1984, 580)

Sartre opposes to this the impulse of play, which is no longer concerned with ‘possessing a being in the world’ (Sartre 1984, 581). The goal of the actor or sportsman, and, perhaps we may add, the writer and the thinker, is not to possess himself as an object but rather ‘to attain himself as a certain being, precisely the being which is in question in his being’ (Sartre 1984, 581).

Let me remind you of the arguments I have been trying to line up. Firstly, I have wanted to have you believe that comedy and thinking are closely akin because they are both have a close relation to nullity and nothingness; they are both, in fact, made of, or compact with nothing. But I have also wanted to convince you that, far from relying essentially on incongruity or essentially on superiority, comedy is unsummarisable, because divided from itself; divided, that is, between the space for notness and negativity that it holds open in its process, and the intolerance of the mixed and the solidification of the distinctions between inside and outside, positive and negative, that are often its aim and outcome . This is why I have cautioned myself against a simple, once-and-for-all identification of thought with comedy, since this can lead to a petrification of both. Perhaps, then, the relation of comedy and cognition is not to be grasped all in one go, for perhaps they exist in a relation of mutual supplementation; comedy can set thought at nought, but thought can exceed and transcend comedy. Comedy and thought are perhaps to be thought of as each one the supplement of the other, each one the way the other takes leave of itself. Could a name for the relationship of these lopsided accomplices be ‘entertainment’? To entertain – from inter, among or between, and tenere, to

hold, meaning, as the OED's principal definition puts it, 'to hold intertwined'. It is perhaps in the relations between writing and thinking, playing and laughing, that we manage to entertain, to omit to omit, the nothingness that we bring into the world, keeping open a loophole for the not-being that is knotted up in our way of being.

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